

Forgiveness – again!

Just a brief thought. I read recently a piece that suggested certain people might ‘deserve’ forgiveness, lenient justice for reasons unspecified.

I wonder. Certainly there are situations in which extenuating or mitigating circumstances suggest that there may be another angle on the offence – for example provocation, mental illness or other forms of stress, so that it would be reasonable to assume that the offender’s actions were not the result of rational calculation or a rush of blood to the head.

As Christians we are urged to agree that in the end such calculations are none of our business: it is for God to decide one way or the other. No one deserves to be forgiven. Forgiveness is invariably the gift and blessing of God bestowed on us not because there are some ‘good’ entries in the ledger of our moral life that counterbalance the ‘bad’. God’s inclination to forgive is the result of God’s desire to welcome us all, regardless of our track record, into the circle of God’s loving care, God’s longing for the well-being and flourishing, the shalom/salaam/peace of all people. Only we, you and I, can shut ourselves out from that circle by refusing to acknowledge reality.

We Christians sometimes talk about *sin*. But often we do so in a way that suggests that sin is what we *do*, or *have done*, or *can’t stop doing*. There is an obvious danger in that approach. If we bear in mind a schedule of actions like these and we can honestly point to our own conduct and claim that we have never done this or that, then we might just imagine that somehow we deserve forgiveness (whatever it may be). Remember the words of John, the writer of three letters towards the end of the New Testament. He warned his readers not to claim that they have no sin.

The biblical approach reminds us that sin is more about what we *are*, unable to see things any other way than the way we saw the world this gorgeous morning, unable to see the world as someone else might see it, unable to see the image of God in the face of a stranger, or even in our own face. That someone else might be a terrified refugee standing on the bank of a flooded river somewhere far away, or someone struggling to manage in adverse circumstances nearer home, or the chief executive of a large business, or a super-rich entrepreneur – you can imagine.

And that may be the key: imagining. It is very tempting to see here only caricatures, to think of such people only in fixed and limited ways. We might say they are either deserving or undeserving.